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Lapid admonishes Belgian ambassador over anti-Semitic festival

"I told him that if there was a possibility of pressing charges in Belgium I will do it myself, as an Israeli politician but not only; also as the son of a Holocaust survivor," says Blue and White MK Yair Lapid.

by Ariel Kahana , AP , Israel Hayom Staff — Published on 02-24-2020 08:42 — Last modified: 02-24-2020 09:52



Blue and White MK Yair Lapid | Photo: Yehoshua Yosef

Blue and White MK Yair Lapid said on Sunday evening that he had admonished Belgium's Ambassador to Israel Olivier Belle over a carnival parade in the industrial city of Aalst this weekend after it included stereotypical depictions of Jews for the second year in a row.

The Belgian government said that the anti-Semitism in the three-day festival embarrassed the nation and endangers society.



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The carnival was kicked off the United Nations' UNESCO heritage list last year after a float rife with anti-Semitic symbols raised worldwide condemnation. Yet despite all the warnings, some again targeted Jews.

"I had a long and very angry conversation with Belgian ambassador," Lapid told *i24NEWS* and *Israel Hayom* in an interview. "I told him that if there was a possibility of pressing charges in Belgium I will do it myself, as an Israeli politician but not only; also as the son of a Holocaust survivor."



JORDAN SAYS BARS ENTRY TO CITIZENS OF CHINA, IRAN, S. KOREA OVER CORONAVIRUS PARIS 19:37

Video: Courtesy of i24 News

The carnival in Aalst has its roots in the Middle Ages and often features satirical floats that take shots at local politicians and the wealthy. Politicians, religious leaders and the rich and famous are relentlessly ridiculed during the three-day festival ahead of Roman Catholic Lent.



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"Even though Aalst Carnival is much more than [anti-Semitic], these facts detract from our values and reputation of our country," Prime Minister Sophie Wilmes said in a statement.

Festival committee chair Dirk Verleysen said floats or individuals "that exceed all limits" of decency would be taken out of the parade, but offensive elements did appear.



A man in brightly colored clothing looks at revelers in carnival costumes, based on a stereotypical depiction of Jews, during the annual carnival parade in Aalst, Belgium,

Sunday (AP/Francisco Seco)

Last year's festivities featured one float depicting Jews with exaggerated features and side locks standing over bags of money. The caricatures recalled anti-Semitic tropes of the Middle Ages and Nazi Germany.



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The carnival had been listed as a UNESCO heritage event until last year, but Aalst renounced the distinction days before the UN cultural agency scrapped it over the anti-Semitic incident.

The carnival can't be treated as a joke or as satire, as they claim it is in Belgium, Lapid said. "These are anti-Semites and they should be treated as such," he added.

Aalst mayor Christoph D'Haese, who has been criticized for taking insufficient action after last year's offensive float, said, "I did not see an anti-Semitic or racist parade. To the contrary, I saw a high mass of free speech and creativity." He took time to pose with a carnival reveler wearing a stereotypical hooked nose.



A Brexit themed float fronted with a caricature of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is paraded in the annual carnival parade in Aalst, Belgium, Sunday (AP/Francisco Seco)



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Last week, Foreign Minister Israel Katz (Likud) called for the parade to be canceled altogether. In a tweet, he said: "Belgium as a Western democracy should be ashamed to allow such a vitriolic anti-Semitic display. I call upon the authorities there to condemn and ban this hateful parade in Aalst."





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D'Haese said the Israeli foreign minister's call to cancel the festival was "truly disproportional."

"I absolutely call on people to avoid these sensitive subjects," he said in an interview with the VRT network. "But that is something completely different than the ban which is called for here."

Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis, countered D'Haese's view and said that "the satirical procession with anti-Semitic tropes in Aalst, Belgium, are extremely offensive and abuse the power of free speech which is such an essential ingredient in any liberal democracy."

The EU office of the American Jewish Committee immediately called on the European Union to investigate the parade.

"Belgian authorities did nothing to prevent the outright anti-Semitic costumes, which clearly violate the EU's founding values, built on the lessons of the Holocaust and World War II," said Daniel Schwammenthal, director of the AJC Brussels-based Transatlantic Institute.

UNESCO, Jewish groups and the EU condemned last year's float as anti-Semitic, with the EU saying it conjured up visions of the 1930s.

<https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/02/24/lapid-admonishes-belgian-ambassador-over-anti-semitic-festival/>

